

INTERVIEW

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Age - 33

Questions - Q. Michael Downs
Answers - A. Wilton C. ~~Lucas~~ ~~Lucas~~

date of interview 11/23/83

Q. When were you born?

A. March 15, 1950

Q. Where at?

✓ A. War Creek, Kentucky in Breathett county.

Q. How many were there in your family?

A. When I was born or now?

Q. How many children did your parents have?

✓ A. Ten children, five boys, five girls.

Q. What did your father do?

✓ A. He was a farmer and he worked off in other states, odd jobs.

Q. Where did you go to high school?

A. Breathett county high school, Jackson, Kentucky.

Q. What was it like growing up in Jackson? What did you do for liesure time, things like that?

A. Well, most liesure time all we ever did was ride the bycycle and play basketball. We went driving ever now and then but after we got in high school there wasn't much transportation so we didn't go driving too often.

Q. Are you married?

A. No sir.

Q. When you entered the service were you drafted or did you enlist?

A. Well I passed for the draft and then I went up and volunteered for the two year draft so I could get my service over with.

Q. I was going to ask you why but you told me shy. Do you think the draft was fair?

✓ A. I think it was, it still is, but, well you've always got your picks and you have people getting people out on count of politics and things. But, to be a fair draft I think everybody should be drafted.

Q. What was the last grade of school you completed before you went into the service?

A. Twelfth grade.

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- Q. You didn't have any college at all before you went into the army?
- A. No sir. I had a scholarship but I turned it down and went to work and then went into the service. I was thinking about my college all the time you know, when I get out and get my G.I. Bill I didn't know if I could afford it.
- Q. You were working?
- A. I was working in Michigan when I got drafted.
- Q. What were you doing?
- A. I was running a machine shop.
- Q. And that was in Michigan?
- A. Yes sir.
- Q. What was your salary?
- A. I think I was making about seven dollars an hour back then.
- Q. What was your MOS in the service?
- A. 91-B20 combat medic.
- Q. Combat medic, just exactly what do you mean by combat medic, what is the difference between a combat medic and . . .
- A. Well, as a corpsman used to say it's a medical . . . a combat medic will enlist combat medic, where as other medics maybe will just be in the states and not have to go overseas. Mostly I worked with the helicopter units. You'd call them docotr's aids I guess, but we did everything from suturing up to applying splints and in time of battle, casualties too, we did a little bit of everything.
- Q. When were you in Vietnam?
- A. I went in Vietnam in March of 1970 and came out first of May, 1971.
- Q. You were there about thirteen or fourteen months?
- A. Fourteen months.
- Q. What unit were you assigned to?
- A. The 192nd assault Helicopter company and 198th Med detachment. I think there were five or six medics there.
- Q. Where was that at?
- A. That was Phan Viet South Vietnam.
- Q. Before you went to Vietnam did you know anything about it? Had you ever heard anything about Vietnam, the country itself or what was going on over there?

- A. Well, when I went to Vietnam I already had a couple of cousins over there, I had an uncle who had been in there four times, he's retired from the Marine Corps and I had a cousin over there at the same time. But, I had heard little about the weather over there and the different regions, moonsoons, different things like that, but really you wouldn't know much about it until after you got there and saw it.
- Q. At what particular time when you were sent to Vietnam did you understand or did you think you understood why Americans were over there?
- A. Really you know, I didn't. I was young and just had basic training, got my orders and they said you're going to Vietnam and really I didn't understand why we were over there. Freedom, you know, keep the American people, freedom, things like that, trying to help South Vietnam that's the only thing I knew about it much.
- Q. Did you see any combat while you were there?
- A. Yes I did.
- Q. O.K. where, tell me a little bit about it, where was it?
- A. Well, we were, like I said I flew with a helicopter unit a whole lot and Phan Viet and Whiskey Mountain and pretty close to Pleiku, there we had a, and the first day really over there, we had a fire fight, first night over there we got bombed but it's, I guess you'd call it combat when you get shot down with a helicopter.
- Q. You never traveled with any Rifle Platoons as a medic?
- A. No, I didn't. I was just assault helicopter company medic.
- Q. What was your daily routine like? No day was average but was . . .
- A. Well some days we'd be back in the unit, back in the company area and we'd do med caps and you know, people would do flight physicals and things like that, then we'd go out and have to do medi-max and things of this nature.
- Q. Did you have any conflict with any Vietnamese people themselves, civilians, Arvins?
- A. Oh yes, we had some.
- Q. Did you form any opinions about them?
- A. Well myself, you know personally I had to be honest with a few things like about my company area we had a Vietnamese hooch maid's come and I feel you couldn't trust any of them myself. The arvins seemed to be sort of your friend, but later things they did I just couldn't put much trust in them, they'd turn their back on you.
- Q. What about the Vietnamese civilians did they really care if we were over there, did they care who was running the country or anything like that?

- A. Well, my personal opinion, I think they just wanted to get what they could out of the Americans and they didn't care for, seems like you try to help them, try to show them and they didn't seem to me like they cared. But, there were a few, every exception, that felt we were needed over there, that we were some help to them. But, my opinion, the majority didn't.
- Q. O.K. you went over in 1970 so you were home when the build-up was going on over there. Did you ever see anything on T.V., did you watch the news about Vietnam on television?
- A. Yes, I watched the news quite often and saw a lot about it.
- Q. Before you went over the sentiment had already been changing at home, people turning against the war?
- A. Yes, they were having rites and different things of this nature,
- Q. What about President Johnson, have you formed any opinion about the way he was handling the war as far as the troop build-ups and things of this nature?
- A. No, I didn't, hadn't thought that much about it.
- Q. What about President Nixon, seems like you know, when he was elected he'd more or less made up his mind to pull out regardless of what we had to do.
- A. Yes I feel that President Nixon, he was the President when I went to Vietnam. At first I resented that, because he was the one that sent me over. But as the years went by, it's something I'd do again, I guess if I had to. If they'd need me I'd have to go I guess. You know a lot of people resents having to go, a lot of other people didn't. I feel good about going over and being one of the lucky ones to come back.
- Q. What about when you were there as far as your leadership over there, your superior officers and stuff do you think they were adequate?
- A. Well, I think so, but I felt sort of like one of them, it was Lieutenant Calley you've heard of that one, I thought he was done wrong, because they said we shouldn't shoot unless they shot first, but if somebody's shooting at you and you've got a rifle and things, I think they shouldn't shoot back and things of this nature. I felt the officers, the officers I had were very nice people, they were leaders. They expected us to obey them and we did, which I came out a spgc 5 in two years. I think they were superior officers.
- Q. What about drug abuse over there?
- A. I tell you the only drug abuse I saw which was a couple of boys using marijuana, that's the only thing I saw while I was over there. I was strictly against that. It was two Negro boys. That's the only two I saw use it.
- Q. Drug abuse was very limited where you were at then?
- A. Yes.
- Q. What about any racial conflicts, did the blacks and whites have any problems?

- A. Well, the only time that . . . No, not really, they usually worked together. But, the only time was when they came back to the company area, it was according to the kind of music they played. Well, they had a fight between the blacks and whites, one boy came in and he told them he wanted to hear some soul music and they said "yea". He said put a little Charlie Pride on. That's about the only time I heard anything, any racial conflict.
- Q. You got along well?
- A. We got along well. We were just like brothers, just one big group.
- Q. You talk about you saw a lot on T.V. before you were sent over, what about the Media coverage, do you think it was fair or do you think it was biased one way or the other?
- A. Well, it's according to which news cast you listen to, some were biased and some I believe covered it just the way it was. Like you say, different ones.
- Q. Why did we lose over in Vietnam? If you think we did lose.
- A. I think, if we lost, they wouldn't let us go in and pursue and take it. I think we should have done that myself instead of laying back you know. We went so far and we just pulled back. It's like going across the river, you go half-way and turn back, that's just defeating your purpose. I think we should have taken it over.
- Q. You think the military was restricted then?
- A. Yes, restricted. Just like bringing up about Lieutenant Calley awhile ago, that raw deal. I think if your going to do something do it.
- Q. Was it a mistake for us to go over there in the first place then?
- A. I don't think so. We were supposed to be one of the strongest nations there are, and to help people. We were over there you might say it was a mistake in a way and in a way it wasn't. But, we're going to be the top power, you know, and we have to show that we have good allies and things of this nature.
- Q. Do you think that we learned anything from it?
- A. Well, on the military standpoing I don't think we did much, just except the people that went over there, a lot of them. Different part of the Nation, country. I don't think that we learned a great deal about it, I mean a lot of people back here think they know but, they don't know till they get back. It might have showed the countries that we might be weaker too. Because not telling them to go on and push on to victory we might have lost.
- Q. What about the way Reagans handling these hot spots today? Lebanon and El Salvador, do you agree with the way he's handling it?
- A. Well, like you say, President Reagans got a choice to make at Granada there. I hear a lot of people talking about that, but at least he went in and tried to do something about it. He lost a lot of lives but I think he made the right decision there.

- Q. As far as the Marines in Lebanon, do you think that they've got some of the same restrictions that you had in Vietnam?
- A. I think they have. The reason is things I've heard on T.V., media, I think they are restricted, similar to Vietnam.
- Q. When you came home did you need any medical treatment?
- A. Yes, I did. I'm drawing sixty percent from the VA now.
- Q. Oh, are you?
- A. Yes, my nerves, hypertension and things.
- Q. How did others treat you when you came home? Any different than before you left?
- A. Well not really, at first you know, your family will, your mom and dad and your brothers and things. They were real happy to see me and all the local people, but after awhile you know, you're just an ordinary person.
- Q. You never got any adverse treatment because you were a Vietnam Veteran?
- A. No, not that much, you're just another Veteran.
- Q. A lot of Veterans are upset because they never got any recognition when they came home. How do you feel about that? You know some of them said we never got a parade like they did in World War II and World War I.
- A. I feel that we should have got something. Right now their trying to get a plaque in the city of Jackson of the Vietnam Veterans. That's been a long time, but I think they should have a parade in the home town for all the boys, just like now they have our Honey festival. I think every year they should have that just like they do these other organizations.
- Q. After you came home did your feelings change towards the army or the government, did you feel like you'd been disillusioned by the government, that they'd sent you over for one purpose and maybe you got over there and found that things were entirely different?
- A. Well, after I got out I sort of felt bad about the army because that was two years of my life, you know, that I could have gotten my education sooner. For no reason at all we were restricted. I felt that it was right in a way to go but, in another way I felt that it was bad.
- Q. How do you feel about the volunteer army versus the draft?
- A. Well, you've got a volunteer army here and the draft. Well, I think the draft if everybody's available for the draft and they take them in, you're going to get some pretty good soldiers. And the volunteers I believe are people who can't get jobs anywhere else. I prefer the draft over the volunteer, because with the volunteer you're going to get anybody, but if they had a test to pass you know, but I still believe in the draft.
- Q. We're not getting a true cross-section of the country.
- A. No, they're not getting the mean or the average.
- Q. When you got out did you return to your old job?
- A. No, I started my education.

Q. You started to college as soon as you got out?

A. When I got out, program for Veterans at Morehead.

Q. It was Morehead?

A. Yes COP program.

Q. Why did you start college instead of going back to work?

A. After I got out I thought about it, and I was up North working in Michigan and I didn't care much for it up there and I was always an honor student in high school and grade school and I love education, searching new ideas and things and I just always loved school, I felt like this would be a good opportunity to go.

Q. What year was that?

A. 1972 when I started. I layed out a few months.

Q. What was your major?

A. Elementary Education.

Q. Why did you pick Morehead?

A. Well Dr. Ted Evans, we were in the COP program and it's basically for the veterans, and we were teachers aids, taking classes two night classes four or five nights a week and they gave me the opportunity to go there. I'd always heard Morehead was a good school and it's not too far from home, about an hour and a half drive. I like Morehead a lot.

Q. Of course when you came back the Vietnam war was still going on. Was there any kind of campus unrest, any kind of demonstrations or things of this nature, like there was in other parts of the country?

A. I didn't see any.

Q. Have you joined any Veterans organizations since you've been out?

A. Yes, I belong to the VFW and the DAV, Disabled American Veterans.

Q. Are you an active member, do you attend the meetings?

A. Yes I attend the meetings. I went to a session in Louisville they held this summer of the DAV, Nationwide.

Q. Did you join any organizations on Campus? Did Morehead have any Veterans organizations?

A. No, not when I was there.

Q. Have you ever taken part in any kind of protest?

A. No, I haven't.

- J.H. Well, I don't know whether you thought you had a choice.
- Ans. Well, I felt at first that I didn't have a choice for undergraduate school. I didn't think I had a choice because I'd dropped out of highschool. We had an open admissions policy here for people over twenty-one.
- J.H. Do you think the quality of the education . . . Do you think it was education that really prepared you for getting back into civilian life and getting a job and a career?
- Ans. Yes, I think so. I think though that I don't really have anything to compare to except people I've talked to, and I've got friends that went to school at Eastern, Western, and I feel that, well, I've definitely got friends here that graduated from here, only been in the library once or twice, and I don't know how they did it, but I know I had to practically live in the library, and I wondered if this was because of my lack of preparation for college or what.
- J.H. I also had in mind the quality of education that you received, were you satisfied with it?
- Ans. I think so. I'm not totally satisfied with the perception of the academic world as getting you ready for a job, but I think -- I step on toes when I say I don't think it makes any difference where a person gets his degree from, I think it's the individual that makes the difference. And I think it doesn't make any difference if a person is a straight A student it depends on where he's starting at.
- J.H. A couple of other questions I wanted to ask you Claude. Did you write any letters that you saved that might be of any help to us in Understanding your experiences that you'd be willing to share?
- Ans. I think maybe, I'll check. I've got a sister who I wrote to more than anybody else she'd possibly have some. I don't personally.
- J.H. Historians are looking for documents as well as what we have on tape. Do you have any pictures or mementos of your time in Vietnam that you've saved and cherish, things that kind of remind us of those days?
- Ans. Well, here again it's sort of ironic, I don't know how to say how I feel about it. The unit I was in you weren't allowed to have cameras. I know a lot of people in Vietnam, a lot of ground combat that had cameras, but when I was there, first of all you couldn't carry it, you either had to carry a camera or something to eat. You know a lot of cameras went by the wayside. And then it was made a policy that there would be no cameras.
- J.H. So you don't have any pictures?
- Ans. No, maybe there's one picture.
- J.H. How about other mementos of your time over there, anything at all that you brought back with you?
- Ans. Things that are personal to you. I had a pair of -- this is comical really -- when we first went over there was no such thing as a camouflage tee-shirts or underwear. So we'd been over there I guess about six months, not that long, and somebody came up with this bright idea that we camouflage our underclothes, tee-shirts and shorts, so I have two or three pairs of shorts that we dyed in coffee. It worked.
- J.H. Up until that time they were white, is that it?

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Ans. Yes.

M.D. We didn't wear them, for the simple reason we weren't going to pay, have to go down and pay for camouflauge underwear, so we never wore them. And most usually the old type would rot right off of you, so we never wore underwear.

J.H. I was thinking seriously about if I could get enough of the war mementos together to try to establish a little muesum here in the library. Kind of a archives of material of men, brought back from Vietnam. This is what I had in mind when I asked you this question.

Ans. I've got a hat that I wore when I was on gun patrol.

J.H. Then you will take a look and see if any letters are available and give us copies? I want to establish a plaque for our alumni who served in Vietnam. Would you be in favor of it?

Ans. Not if you have to force somebody to do it. It would appeal to me if the Veterans themselves didn't have to do it.

